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EARLY CHRISTIAN VOLUNTARY MARTYRDOM: A STATEMENT FOR THE DEFENCE

Many studies of early Christian martyrdom have noted the phenomenon of voluntary martyrdom. However, most scholars, drawing on criticism of the practice found in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and Clement of Alexandria, dismiss those who provoked their own arrest and death as deviant, heretical, or numerically insignificant. This article argues instead that the earliest Christian martyrologies celebrate voluntary martyrdom as a valid mainstream Christian practice, which faced only isolated challenge in the first three centuries. Furthermore, pagan sources support the view that voluntary martyrdom was a significant historical as well as literary phenomenon. As there is no reason to conclude voluntary martyrdom was anything other than a valid subset of proto-orthodox Christian martyrdom, more attention should be paid to this phenomenon by early Christian historians.

Martyrdom was a contentious issue for the early Church. While martyrs are enthusiastically celebrated in Tertullian's famous saying, 'the blood of Christians is seed',¹ Augustine's equally well-known dictum, *martyrem non facit poena sed causa*,² reveals that not all Christians who died for Jesus were universally recognised as martyrs. Augustine was specifically aiming at Donatists persecuted and killed by the Catholics. Since they were Christians, he reasoned, they could not be martyrs.³ Nonetheless, Augustine reflects the problem that a variety of attitudes to martyrdom are found within earliest Christianity. Alongside the position most scholars take to be orthodox—that Christians should accept martyrdom when it comes—are found 'Gnostic' Christian voices who despised the practice

¹ *Apology* 50.

² *Epistle* 89.2.

³ For a discussion of the conflict between the Donatists and Catholics, see M. A. Tilley, *The Bible in Christian North Africa: The Donatist World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); A. Dearn, 'Voluntary Martyrdom and the Donatist Schism', *Studia Patristica* 36 (2006), 27-32; P. Brown, 'St Augustine's Attitude towards Religious Coercion', *JRS* 54 (1964), 107-16. The classic study is W. H. C. Frend, *The Donatist Church: A Movement of Protest in Roman North Africa* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).

and thought those who submitted to torture and death were foolish, and that Christian leaders who encouraged confession before authorities were false teachers.⁴

The foolish – thinking [in] their heart [that] if they confess, ‘We are Christians’ in word only (but) not with power, while giving themselves over to ignorance, to a human death...thinking that they will live, when (really) they are in error – hasten towards the principalities and the authorities. They fall into their clutches because of the ignorance that is in them...[they do] not [know] that they [will destroy] themselves. If the [Father were to] desire a [human] sacrifice, he would become [vainglorious].⁵

In the same way as the author of the *Testament of Truth* criticised those who advocated martyrdom, the proto-orthodox returned fire on those Christian groups who failed to produce martyrs. So much so that for Justin a positive attitude to martyrdom was one of the most significant signs of orthodoxy. Justin contends that those who ‘are not persecuted or killed’ by the Roman officials cannot be Christians.⁶ Similarly, Tertullian observed that in times of persecution, ‘heretics’ do nothing to mark them out as Christian, and so are ignored by the authorities.

Now we are in the midst of an intense heat, the very dogstar of persecution...the fire and the sword have tried some Christians, and the beasts have tried others; others are in prison, *longing for martyrdom* which they have tasted already, having been beaten by clubs and tortured...We ourselves, having been appointed

⁴ ‘Gnostic’ attitudes to martyrdom are more diverse than was commonly believed. See C. R. Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom: Diverse Practices, Theologies, and Traditions* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), 157-162; and E. Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979); *idem*, ‘Gnostic and orthodox views of Christ’s passion: paradigms for the Christian’s response to persecution?’ in B. Layton (ed.) *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism* (2 vols; Leiden: Brill, 1980) 1.262-83.

⁵ *Test. Truth* 31.21-32.21; See also *Test. Truth* 34.4-6; *Apoc. Peter* 78.31-80.7

⁶ Justin, *1 Apol.* 26.

for pursuit, are like hares being hemmed in from a distance—and *the heretics go about as usual!*⁷

If, as Tertullian states, the true Christian longs for martyrdom, arguably the early Christian figure who displays the most fully developed enthusiasm for death is Ignatius of Antioch. Ignatius, having been arrested, is being taken to Rome for trial and execution. He assures the Roman church that this is what he wishes to happen and that on no account should they interfere with his martyrdom.

I am writing to all the churches, and I give injunction to everyone, that I am dying willingly for God's sake, if you do not prevent it. I plead with you not to be an 'unreasonable kindness' to me. Allow me to be eaten by the beasts, through which I can attain God. I am God's wheat, and I am ground by the teeth of wild beasts, so that I may become pure bread of Christ...Do me this favour...Let there come upon me fire, and the cross, and struggle with wild beasts, cutting and tearing apart, racking of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body...may I but attain to Jesus Christ.⁸

Successful intercession on behalf of those sentenced to death was not unknown,⁹ but it is quite clear Ignatius does not wish the Roman Christians to attempt to have him freed either through lobbying or intercession. For Ignatius, death is the way to attain God: 'the one who is near to the sword is near to God, the one who is in the company of wild beasts is in the company of God.'¹⁰ Ignatius is not merely resigned to his fate, but desires it.

An intense desire for death within proto-orthodoxy marks out a further group whose attitude to martyrdom has proven to be problematic for both the early church and

⁷ Tertullian, *Scorp.* 1, 5, 7 (emphasis added).

⁸ Ignatius, *Rom.* 4.1-5.3.

⁹ See for example Josephus, *Life*, 75. In the *Acts of Andrew*, the martyr is angry with those who intercede with the governor in an attempt to secure his release.

¹⁰ See Ignatius, *Smyrn.* 4.

contemporary scholarship. These are the so-called ‘voluntary martyrs’—Christians who enthusiastically and wilfully courted arrest and death. In two influential essays, Geoffrey de Ste. Croix argued that the number of voluntary martyrs in the early Church was ‘surprisingly large’ and that the phenomenon actually exacerbated or even caused outbreaks of persecution.¹¹ De Ste. Croix’s builds his case mainly, although by no means exclusively, on Eusebius’ account of *The Martyrs of Palestine*. Of the 47 martyrs about whose arrest Eusebius gives any information (he is silent on the circumstances of 44), de Ste. Croix counts 31 who either sought out arrest or needlessly brought themselves to the attention of hostile magistrates.

Recently, Lorraine Buck has attacked these conclusions, arguing that voluntary martyrdom was not as widespread as de Ste. Croix supposes.¹² First, Buck questions de Ste. Croix’s handling of *The Martyrs of Palestine* arguing there is no warrant to ignore the 44 Egyptians among the number recorded by Eusebius. She suggests that it would not be unreasonable to suppose they were arrested in Egypt and taken to the mines. She finds no evidence of these martyrs provoking their own death, and since they constitute almost half of the 91 martyrs mentioned in this episode, de Ste. Croix is hardly correct in maintaining that ‘twice as many (if not more) were volunteers or had otherwise attracted the attention of the authorities’.¹³ However, in fairness to de Ste. Croix, he is correct that Eusebius simply does not record the manner of their arrests. Therefore, we have no way of knowing whether or not any, some, or all of the 44 provoked their own arrests.

¹¹ G. E. M. De Ste. Croix, ‘Aspects of the “Great” Persecution’, *Harvard Theological Review* 47 (1954), 75-109, reprinted in M. Whitby and J. Streeter, *Christian Persecution, Martyrdom, and Orthodoxy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 35-78; ‘Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?’, *Past and Present* 26 (1963), 6-38. For book length treatments of voluntary martyrdom, see P. Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom and Cosmic Conflict in Early Christianity* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); and C. Butterweck, ‘*Martyriumssucht* in der alten Kirche?: Studien zur Darstellung und Deutung frühchristlicher Martyrien’ (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1995).

¹² P. L. Buck, ‘Voluntary martyrdom revisited’, *JTS* 63 (2012), 125-35

¹³ De Ste. Croix, ‘Aspects’, 101-2.

Building on the De Ste. Croix's studies, Arthur Droge and James Tabor note that in addition to those who provoked authorities to arrest them, some Christians actually killed themselves without condemnation from Christian leaders.¹⁴ Like de Ste. Croix, Droge and Tabor argue that instances of voluntary martyrdom was relatively high in early Christianity and that they drew inspiration from the Graeco-Roman Noble Death tradition, which of course could legitimately include suicide.¹⁵ Christians in their reflections on martyrdom do indeed employ famous Graeco-Roman suicides as comparable examples, and it is certainly true that there are many examples of Christians taking their own lives.¹⁶ The most dramatic of these accounts is Agathonice, who with her son is a member of the crowd who witness the martyrdoms of Carpus and Papyrus. As Papyrus is about to be executed, he sees a vision of the glory of the Lord (τὸν δο/καυ κυριου), which Agathonice also experiences.

Realising that this was a call from heaven, she raised her voice at once, 'Here is a meal that has been prepared for me. I must partake and eat of this glorious feast!' The mob shouted out, 'Have pity on your son!' And the blessed Agathonice said, 'He has God who can take pity on him; for he has providence over all. Let me do what I have come for!' And taking off her cloak, she threw herself joyfully upon the stake.¹⁷

Behind Droge and Tabor's study lies a concern to contribute positively to the contemporary debate on assisted dying.¹⁸ However, they unhelpfully negatively characterise the early

¹⁴ A. J. Droge and J. D. Tabor, *A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and Jews in Antiquity* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992).

¹⁵ See Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 17-51; G. W. Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 59-74; J. W. van Henten and F. Avemarie, *Martyrdom and Noble Death: Selected Texts from Graeco-Roman, Jewish and Christian Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 2002). For an impressive survey of self-killing in the ancient world, see A. van Hooff, *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity* (London: Routledge, 1990).

¹⁶ Tertullian cites Lucretia, Empedocles, Heraclitus, Cleopatra, and Socrates as positive points of comparison to Christian martyrdom (*Ad Martyras* 4). Among the suicides recounted by Eusebius are: the elderly Apollonia threw herself on a fire to avoid reciting blasphemy (*H.E.* 6.41.7), a mother and her two daughters drowned themselves to escape defilement (*H.E.* 8.12.2-5), while both men and women leapt on the pyre during the Diocletian persecutions (*H.E.* 8.6.6).

¹⁷ *Mart. Carpus* 42-44.

Christians as displaying a ‘preoccupation with death’.¹⁹ For them, Agathonice is an example of the Christian predilection to engage in ‘spontaneous acts of self-destruction’.²⁰ However, martyrdom, at least for those Christians who embraced it, was never an unfortunate necessity, and certainly not an act of self-destruction. For early Christians, embracing death was rushing towards life.²¹

Nonetheless, Buck’s objection to Droge and Tabor’s description is primarily concerned with their characterisation of such acts as ‘spontaneous’. Buck assumes that all martyrs would have spent much time preparing for death. There is little in the text to suggest Agathonice was anything other than a pagan bystander, who during the spectacle apparently felt an overwhelming and spontaneous call to participate. Nonetheless, Buck contests that ‘Agathonice did not act spontaneously when she drew attention to herself. She had come to the trial fully prepared to confess should she receive inspiration, and she clearly did!’²² The hagiographical nature of martyrology cautions the historian to tread carefully. Yet Buck *creates* a backstory for the martyrs and imagines them carefully preparing for death.

What might seem to be a sudden impetuous or even irrational act on the part of the martyrs could well have been, *and often probably was*, the culmination of a long and arduous period of prayer, devotion and spiritual readiness, and, as such, the logical consummation of a deep and overpowering faith.²³

While I am not suggesting this *cannot* be the case, there is simply no evidence to support the assertion. Here, Buck simply reflects a common scholarly ideological predisposition to

¹⁸ See Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 1-16, 185-189. For a vigorous response to this agenda, see D. W. Amundsen, ‘Did the Early Christians Lust after Death? A New Wrinkle in the Doctor Assisted Suicide Debate’, *Christian Research Journal* 18 (1996), 11-22, reprinted in T. J. Demy and G. P. Stewart (eds), *Suicide: A Christian Response: Crucial Considerations for Choosing Life* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998), 285-295.

¹⁹ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 132.

²⁰ Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 129.

²¹ On this point, see Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 71-102.

²² Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’ 133.

²³ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 133.

dismiss voluntary martyrdom from orthodox Christian behaviour. She is quite open in her belief that Christians who play no role in their arrest are the ‘true martyrs’,²⁴ while the voluntary martyr is ‘answerable for his or her own death.’²⁵

Buck is by no means alone among scholars in seeking to distance the early Church from behaviour which may be considered extreme. Mark Reasoner similarly states, ‘It is an established tradition within *the Christianity which became identified as orthodox* that those who intentionally sought martyrdom would not be recognised as martyrs.’²⁶ Everett Ferguson concedes, ‘It is true that Christians sometimes were *guilty* of deliberate provocation. But the model which was commended as *normative* Christian conduct showed a more submissive demeanour in its resistance.’²⁷ What is noteworthy is the guilt Ferguson attaches to voluntary martyrdom, a moral judgement similar to that made by John Dominic Crossan, who also finds provoked martyrdom to be ‘unethical’, since it colludes with the violence of the persecutor.²⁸ Meanwhile, Ignatius’ attitude has also been dismissed by various scholars as ‘a neurotic death-wish’,²⁹ an ‘abnormal mentality’,³⁰ a ‘morbid obsession’,³¹ and ‘certainly not the normal attitude to martyrdom’.³² The voluntary martyrs

²⁴ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 125.

²⁵ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 127.

²⁶ M. Reasoner, ‘Persecution’ in R. P. Martin and P. H. Davies (eds), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), 907-14 (913) (emphasis added).

²⁷ E. Ferguson, ‘Early Christian Martyrdom and Civil Disobedience’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1 (1993), 73-83 (81) (emphasis added).

²⁸ J. D. Crossan, *The Birth of Christianity: Discovering What Happened in the Years Immediately after the Crucifixion of Jesus* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999), 285.

²⁹ K. R. Morris, “‘Pure wheat of God’ or neurotic deathwish?”: A Historical and Theological Analysis of Ignatius of Antioch’s Zeal for Martyrdom,’ *Fides et Historia* 26 (1994), 24-41.

³⁰ De Ste. Croix, ‘Why were the Early Christians Persecuted?’ 24.

³¹ G. Williams, *The Sanctity of Life and the Criminal Law* (2nd edition; New York: Knopf, 1970), 254.

³² A. B. Luter, ‘Martyrdom’ in R. P. Martin and P. H. Davids (eds), *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and its Development* (Downer Grove: Inter Varsity Press 1996), 717-22 (720). Compare C. R. Moss, ‘Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom’. Moss argues the category of ‘voluntary martyrdom’ was created in the third century to justify flight during periods of persecution. Those who took voluntary exile are compared favourably against those who provoke their own deaths by Clement (see below). However, Moss complains that scholars have tended to accept Clement’s categorisation at face value.

are, therefore, a much maligned group of early Christians, whose motives and even existence have been questioned. In what follows, I argue that voluntary martyrdom was in fact a significant literary and historical phenomenon which must be more adequately treated by scholars of early Christianity.

This scholarly disdain for voluntary martyrdom is reflected in some quarters of the early Church. Clement of Alexandria complains about some Christians too eager for death.

We too blame those who have rushed on death, for there are some who are really not ours but share only the name, who are eager to hand themselves over in hatred against the creator, athletes of death. We say that these men take themselves off without witness, even if they are officially executed. For they do not preserve the characteristic mark of faithful witness, because they do not know the real God, but give themselves up to a futile death.³³

Those who rush into death, he claims, hate life by demonstrating ‘hatred to the Creator.’ They ‘share the same name’ as Clement’s group, but do not ‘belong’ to them. Their deaths are vain for they do not ‘know God’—though Clement does not say in what way they do not know God. It is not clear whether it is their rush towards death alone that causes the negative reaction in Clement, or also some point of doctrine that causes them to be outside of Clement’s boundary. Clement does not (indeed, he cannot) deny that they *look* like martyrs; they are arrested, undergo trial, and are officially executed. Nor does not even deny they share the name ‘Christian.’ But at a stroke of Clement’s pen such faithful witnesses were erased from the ranks of the martyrs.³⁴ Clement’s attack on these martyrs comes in the context of a response to ‘some heretics’ who regard martyrdom as suicide. They have, according to Clement, an ‘impious and cowardly love of life’.³⁵ Nonetheless, in dubbing the

³³ Clement, *Strom.* 4.16.3-17.3.

³⁴ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 24-25.

³⁵ *Strom.* 4.4.

more radical martyrs ‘athletes of death’ who ‘hand themselves over to the authorities’ and ‘do away with themselves’³⁶ he deploys similar arguments against them as is found in ‘Gnostic’ texts such as *the Testimony of Truth*.³⁷ However, the main question is whether Clement represents an established antipathy to voluntary martyrdom, or does his aversion constitute an innovation in the proto-orthodox movement? When not faced by critics of martyrdom, Clement is as enthusiastic about martyrdom as any other early Christian. The true Christian, he says,

can readily give up his life because of his distaste for the body, and so avoids denying his faith and does not fear death because of the hope for earthly rewards.

He will approach death with gladness and thankfulness, both to God who had predestined him for martyrdom, and the one who gave the opportunity for death.³⁸

For Clement, martyrdom is ‘perfection,’ because it exhibits the perfect work of love, and is pre-ordained by God. Indeed, he goes on to say that martyrdom is preferable to living with infirmity, one of the classic instances in Noble Death tradition where suicide is considered to be legitimate.³⁹

Similar ideas are found in the writings of Tertullian, who insists martyrdom is both sent by God, and better than life. The martyr’s blood was the key to unlock Paradise,⁴⁰ and death was a welcome release from an evil world: ‘Nothing matters to us in this age but to

³⁶ The phrase *ἐοκάσκειν ἑαυτοῦ* became the standard term in the Hellenistic period for suicide (van Hooff, *Autothanasia*, 140).

³⁷ For further comparison between Clement and ‘Gnostic’ critiques of voluntary martyrdom, see W. H. C. Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution in the Early Church: A Study of a Conflict from the Maccabees to Donatus* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 351-61.

³⁸ *Strom.* 4.4.

³⁹ Other occasions where suicide was considered to be a Noble Death include: when offered for friends or country; suffering intolerable pain; *devotio*—when offered to the god’s for the benefit of another; devastating misfortune; great shame; or when ordered by the State. For discussion, see J. W. van Henten, ‘Noble Death and Martyrdom in Antiquity’ in S. Fuhrmann and R. Grundmann, *Martyriumsvorstellungen in Antike und Mittelalter: Leben oder Sterben für Gott?* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 85-110.

⁴⁰ Tertullian, *Bapt.* 1.

escape from it with all speed.’⁴¹ For Tertullian, martyrdom was all that prevented some from losing their salvation—it was the ‘second supplies of comfort.’⁴²

[God] has chosen to contend with a disease and to do good by imitating the malady: to destroy death by death, to dissipate killing by killing, to dispel tortures by tortures, to disperse in a vapour punishments by punishments, to bestow life by withdrawing it, to aid the flesh by injuring it, to preserve the soul by snatching it away.⁴³

Death through martyrdom is better than living an incident-free life. Therefore, both Clement and Tertullian, writing in the early third century, produce material which might inspire enthusiasm for martyrdom.

However, Clement’s position against voluntary martyrdom finds a possible mid-second century antecedent in the account of a failed voluntary death in *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*.

There was a Phrygian named Quintus who had only recently come from Phrygia, and when he saw the wild animals he turned cowardly. Now he was the one who had given himself up and had forced some others to give themselves up voluntarily. With him the governor used many arguments and persuaded him to swear by the gods and offer sacrifice. *This is the reason, brothers, that we do not approve of those who come forward of themselves: this is not the teaching of the gospel.*⁴⁴

⁴¹ Tertullian, *Apol.* 41.5.

⁴² Tertullian, *Scorp.* 6.

⁴³ Tertullian, *Scorp.* 5.

⁴⁴ Οὐκ οὐ#twj dida/skei to\ eu)agge/lion, *Mart.Poly.* 4 (emphasis added). It may be that Matthew 10.23 is in mind here, but as B. Dehandschutter rightly notes, ‘These texts shed little light on the case of Quintus’, ‘The New Testament and the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*’ in A. Gregory and C. Tuckett (eds) *Trajectories through the New Testament and Apostolic Fathers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 395-405. For a similar assessment, see also M. W. Holmes, ‘The *Martyrdom of Polycarp* and the New Testament Passion Narratives’ in Gregory and Tuckett (eds), *Trajectories*, 407-32.

In this account, presenting oneself for arrest is criticised. Here, it seems, is clear evidence of the disapproval of voluntary martyrdom which predates Clement by several decades.

The *Acts of Cyprian* also appears to provide historical continuity of this position into the mid-third century when the Bishop declares ‘our discipline forbids anyone to surrender voluntarily.’⁴⁵ However, Cyprian’s declaration of the ‘orthodox’ position is somewhat undermined when, as he is led to his death, his followers voluntarily present themselves *en masse* to the authorities, wishing to die.

Then he read from a tablet, ‘Thanscius Cyprian is sentenced to die by the sword.’

The bishop Cyprian said, ‘Thanks be to God!’

After the sentence, the crowd of his fellow Christians said, ‘Let us also be beheaded with him!’⁴⁶

This text makes no condemnation of this attempt at mass voluntary martyrdom. While we may doubt the historicity of the incident, there is no reason to conclude that for the author of this text, and presumably his readers, anyone who presented him or herself to those in authority asking to be killed would be considered anything other than a *bona fide* martyr.

Tertullian recounts a similar phenomenon in which he describes how the Christians of Asia presented themselves to the bemused proconsul, Arrius Antonius, demanding to be martyred. ‘On ordering a few persons to be led forth to execution, he said to the rest, “O miserable men, if you wish to die, you have cliffs and nooses!”’⁴⁷ Tertullian clearly approved of the actions of these Christians, and indeed threatens the proconsul to whom he is writing with the same behaviour.

⁴⁵ *A. Cyprian* 1.5.

⁴⁶ *A. Cyprian* 4.3–5.1.

⁴⁷ Tertullian, *Scap.* 5.1.

Your cruelty is our glory. Only see you to it, that in having such things as these to endure, *we do not feel ourselves constrained to rush forth to the combat*, if only to prove that we have no dread of them, but on the contrary, *even invite their infliction*.⁴⁸

Importantly, Tertullian does not regard these voluntary martyrs as a particular subset of ordinary martyrs. Despite the Asian proconsul seeing little difference between the action of the Christians and unreflective suicide, for Tertullian, these acts are those of authentic martyrs.

Moving further forward from Clement's condemnation of the practice, we find a further example of voluntary death in the early fourth century. The Christian Euplus went to the Prefect's council chamber and shouted out to them, 'I want to die; I am a Christian.'⁴⁹ Euplus' direct action is not condemned, and he is designated 'the blessed (makarioj) Euplus.' After refusing to recant during torture, he finally 'endured the contest of martyrdom (to_n to~u marturi/ouv a(gw~na) and received the crown of orthodox belief (o)rqodo/cou pi/stewj).'⁵⁰ For the author, Euplus is not a *voluntary* martyr; he is simply a martyr who receives the unfading crown.⁵¹

What modern scholars dub 'voluntary martyrdom' was unremarkable for many in the early Church, and certainly attracted little criticism.⁵² In the *Passion of Perpetua*, the church leader, Saturus, is acclaimed as the 'builder of our strength', and in the eponymous martyr's

⁴⁸ Tertullian, *Scap.* 5.1 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ *A.Euplus* 1.1. In the Latin version, Euplus is led to the place of execution with a copy of the scriptures around his neck (*A.Euplus* [Latin], 3).

⁵⁰ *A.Euplus* 2.2.

⁵¹ *A.Euplus* 2.4.

⁵² Moss ('Discourse of Voluntary Martyrdom', 539) criticises the 'assumption that voluntary martyrdom exists as a separate, identifiable category and practice'. Nonetheless, it seems to me to be legitimate for modern scholars to draw distinctions between martyrs' deaths, even to draw the conclusion that in respect of the earliest Christianity, 'approval of martyrdom is not dependent on whether or not the death was voluntary or provoked' (Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 28).

vision, he was the first to ‘ascend the ladder’.⁵³ However, Saturus had not been with the group when they were arrested; he ended up in prison because ‘*he gave himself up of his own accord*’.⁵⁴ What appears to have occurred in this instance is that a church leader voluntarily handed himself over to arrest so he could continue to minister to his community in prison. He is praised for this voluntary act, which is at odds with Clement’s opposition to volunteerism, and his view that those who do nothing to avoid capture become complicate in the crime of the persecutor.

If he who kills a man of God sins against God, he also who presents himself before the judgment-seat becomes guilty of his death. And such is also the case with him who does not avoid persecution, but out of daring presents himself for capture. Such a one, as far as in him lies, becomes an accomplice in the crime of the persecutor.⁵⁵

The failure in the *Passion of Perpetua* and other Christian texts to make any distinction between the behaviour of those who provoked their own martyrdom and those whom Buck and others would regard as true martyrs is found again in Eusebius’ account of the *Martyrs of Palestine*. When it was announced that public executions of Christians would take place in an exhibition in Gaza, six young men

having first bound their own hands, went in haste to Urbanus, who was about to open the exhibition, evidencing great zeal for martyrdom. They confessed that they were Christians, and by their ambition for all terrible things, showed that those who glory in the religion of the God of the universe do not cower before the attacks of wild beasts. Immediately, after creating no ordinary astonishment in the

⁵³ *Mart.Perpetua* 4.5.

⁵⁴ *Mart.Perpetua* 4, 5 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ Clement, *Strom.* 10. Compare Tertullian who regarded flight in the face of persecution to be apostasy (*De Fuga* 5.1). In light of such fundamental disagreement, Frend quips, ‘it is perhaps fortunate for the Church that Clement and Tertullian never met’ (*Martyrdom and Persecution*, 360).

governor and those who were with him, they were cast into prison. After a few days two others were added to them. One of them, named Agapius, had in former confessions endured dreadful torments of various kinds. The other, who had supplied them with the necessities of life, was called Dionysius. All of these eight were beheaded on one day at Caesarea.⁵⁶

At this juncture, we note that de Ste. Croix finds in this account two different categories of voluntary martyr. The six who appeared before Urbanus obviously court their own arrest and death, but Dionysius is counted in a sub-category of voluntary martyrs which de Ste. Croix dubs ‘quasi-volunteers’, that is, where Christians act in such a way—in this case bringing food to convicted Christians—as to inevitably attract the attention of the authorities, which subsequently results in arrest and death.⁵⁷ Buck dissents, arguing that those whom de Ste. Croix classifies as quasi-volunteers were ‘doing nothing more than was expected of Christians’, such as looking after the welfare of those in prison. Therefore, for Buck, Dionysius’ death cannot be classified as a voluntary martyrdom, as he ‘had no hand in his...arrest or execution,’⁵⁸ but was instead ‘a more remarkable example of the true martyr’.⁵⁹ While distinguishing between these two types of martyrs may appear reasonable, the literary presentation of what Droge and Tabor dub *secondary martyrdom*⁶⁰ stresses the voluntary nature of Christian self-disclosure which inevitably leads to arrest and execution.

An example of the phenomenon is found the story of the court proceedings against an unnamed woman and her teacher, Ptolemaeus. The bystander Lucius, outraged by the sentence handed down to them, protests:

⁵⁶ *Martyrs of Palestine* 3.

⁵⁷ De Ste. Croix, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 177.

⁵⁸ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 127.

⁵⁹ Buck, ‘Voluntary Martyrdom’, 128.

⁶⁰ See Droge and Tabor, *Noble Death*, 132.

What is the charge? He has not been convicted of adultery, fornication, murder, clothes stealing, robbery, or of any crime whatsoever; yet you have punished this man because he confesses the name of Christian?⁶¹

Lucius then confesses that he too is a Christian and is executed with the others. Similarly, in the *Martyrs of Lyons*, Vettius Epagathus, a young man who ‘walked blamelessly in all the commandments and precepts of the Lord...possessing great devotion to God and fervour in spirit’,⁶² spoke up from the crowd in defence of the Christians. He also confessed (o(mologh/santoj) he too was accepted into the ‘ranks of the martyrs’ (to\ n klh~pon tw~n martu/rwn).⁶³ While some may wish to distinguish between the actions of voluntary martyrs and Epagathus’ secondary martyrdom, the editorial gloss stresses the *voluntary* nature of his death.

Called the Christians’ advocate, he possessed the Advocate within him...which he demonstrated by the fullness of his love, *consenting as he did to lay down his life* in defence of his fellow Christians. He was and is a true disciple of Christ following the Lamb wherever he goes.⁶⁴

Christian martyrology makes little or no distinction between voluntary martyrdom, secondary martyrdom, or what some prefer to call ‘authentic’ martyrdom. This holds true even in the case of Agathonice’s suicide, an action which most modern readers would wish to distinguish from the more traditional martyrdoms of Carpus and Papyrus. However, once again, the author of the acts makes no distinction between the three deaths.

⁶¹ *Mart.Ptol.* 16.

⁶² *Mart.Lyons* 1.9.

⁶³ *Mart.Lyons* 1.10.

⁶⁴ *Mart.Lyons* 1.10 (emphasis added). By alluding to John 10.18, the editor implies Jesus’ execution is a voluntary death.

And she thus gave up her spirit and died together with the saints. And the Christians secretly collected their remains and protected them for the glory of Christ and the praise of his martyrs.⁶⁵

Interestingly, we witness a more ‘orthodox’ retelling of the story in the later Latin recension, where Agathonice is given a more traditional martyrdom complete with arrest, trial, and a refusal to offer sacrifice. When she refuses to do so, even for the sake of her children (to which, like the Greek recension, she answers, ‘My children have God who watches over them’),⁶⁶ she is hung on a stake and burned.⁶⁷ This development is clear evidence of a later anxiety to distinguish between provoked and non-provoked arrest. A later Christian hand felt the need to de-radicalise Agathonice’s death and to provide her with the literary apparatus of a more ‘normal’ martyrdom. Therefore, in the transformation of Agathonice’s death, we see the rewriting of martyrological discourse albeit in a different way from the approach taken by Clement.

When faced with such martyrs, there were two options open for the ‘orthodox’ revisionists: condemn them as heretics, or rewrite their stories. Clement chose the former, when he dubbed even those who made confession before the authorities, ‘athletes of death.’ Agathonice’s Latin biographers chose the latter course of action.⁶⁸

The development of the Agathonice narrative reflects a tendency in early Christianity to move away from incorporating voluntary martyrs into a wider martyrological schema, to isolating these particular deaths as a distinct category in order to condemn them.

⁶⁵ *Mart. Carpus* 47

⁶⁶ *Mart. Carpus* (Latin) 6.3.

⁶⁷ Though H. Musurillo (*Acts of the Christian Martyrs* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972], xv-xvi) is certainly correct that the Latin text is an abridgement of the older Greek text, there is no need to follow his suggestion that there is a lacuna in the Greek text.

⁶⁸ Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 34.

Clement, in his condemnation of voluntary martyrdom, now looks a far more isolated figure. Nonetheless, we are still left with the difficulty of an early condemnation of the practice in the Quintus pericope in the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. However, in the first instance, it is not clear whether it is giving himself up or denying for which Quintus is really criticised. Clearly not everyone who gave themselves up denied, but without Quintus' *denial* the conclusion, 'This is the reason, brothers, that we do not approve of those who come forward of themselves' would not follow.⁶⁹ Secondly, it has been argued that the Quintus pericope is an interpolation.⁷⁰ Quintus appears suddenly and there is no further reference made to him. In fact, his story interrupts the flow of the narrative. A crowd call for Polycarp (3.2), the story of Quintus is recounted, and then we are told Polycarp hears (a)kou&saj) something which does not disturb him, and wishes remain in Smyrna (5.1). In the extant text, it is the news of Quintus' aborted martyrdom which causes Polycarp's friends to urge him to leave the city! However, if the paragraph is omitted, the story flows freely.

[The crowd] shouted, 'Away with these atheists! Go and get Polycarp.'

Now, at first when the most admirable Polycarp heard of this, he was not disturbed and even decided to stay in Smyrna; but most people advised him to slip out quietly, and so he left...⁷¹

Polycarp is undisturbed by the crowd calling for his arrest, but given the anxiety of others to this news, he follows their advice and leaves. If the Quintus pericope is an interpolation, anti-Montanist sentiment may have been the motivation.⁷²

⁶⁹ This appears to be the position of Peter of Alexander (*Canon* 9). Those who give themselves up are not to be criticised so long as they follow through with their confession. In *Contra Celsum* 8.44, Origen does not recommend flight in the face of persecution, but it is to be preferred over denial under torture.

⁷⁰ H. von Campenhausen, 'Beareitung und Interpolationen des Polykarmartyriums' in *Aus der Frühzeit des Christentums: Studien zur Kirchengeschichte des ersten und zweiten Jahrhunderts* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1963), 253-301. Campenhausen's four stage redaction history is overly neat and has been heavily criticised. B. A. G. M. Dehandschutter, 'The Martyrium Polycarpi: a century of research', *ANRW* II.27.1. (1993) 485-522.

⁷¹ Curiously, Polycarp's initial flight contradicts the introduction: 'The blessed Polycarp...waited to be betrayed, just as the Lord did' (1.1-2). This strengthens the view that the text has undergone redactional activity.

More recently, Candida Moss has argued for a mid-third century dating for the extant form of the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*. She argues legal irregularities cause doubt on its claim to eye witness status, which undermines its early date. Furthermore, there is familiarity with books of the New Testament which were slow to be accepted into the canon, and given its status as the first Christian martyrology, it has an inexplicable lack of literary influence in proceeding hundred years. Most problematically, Moss argues, if *Polycarp* is dated to the mid-second century, then the text anticipates otherwise later developments, such as the church catholic and veneration of relics.⁷³

If the Quintus pericope, either because it is an interpolation or because it is part of a mid-third century text is later than Clement, then Clement's complaint becomes not only the first critic, but also an 'island' of criticism against voluntary martyrdom. He is also the first to draw a distinction between this phenomenon and other forms of martyrdom.⁷⁴ Clement's position does not find any support in contemporaneous Christian literature.⁷⁵ As episcopal authority developed, martyrs, or more accurately confessors represented authority out with ecclesiastical structures.⁷⁶ When bishops such as Clement and Cyprian were among those

⁷² Frend, *Martyrdom and Persecution*, 347. G. Buschmann, *Das Martyrium des Polykarp übersetzt und erklärt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998) regards the whole narrative to be combating Montanists. However, for the view that Montanists were not especially prone to voluntary martyrdom, see W. Tabernee, 'Early Montanism and Voluntary Martyrdom', *Colloquium* 17 (1985), 33-44.

⁷³ C. R. Moss, 'On the Dating of Polycarp: Rethinking the Place of the Martyrdom of Polycarp in the History of Christianity', *Early Christianity* 1 (2010), 539-574. For discussion, see Dehandschutter, 'Martyrium Polycarpi', 497-502; and G. A. Bisbee, *Pre-Decian Acts of Martyrs and Commentary* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 119-21.

⁷⁴ Clement's innovative role in 'making' and 'unmaking' martyrs is discussed by A. van den Hoek, 'Clement of Alexandria on Martyrdom', *Studia Patristica* 26 (1993), 324-41; Bowersock, *Martyrdom and Rome*, 65-71; D. Boyarin, *Dying for God: Martyrdom and the Making of Christianity and Judaism* (California: Stanford University Press, 1999), 61-64; Middleton, *Radical Martyrdom*, 16-30; and Moss, *Ancient Christian Martyrdom*, 145-58.

⁷⁵ However, Clement's innovative position is influential on later Christian writers who defend fleeing from persecution. See especially J. Leemans, 'The idea of "Flight from Persecution" in the Alexandrian Tradition from Clement to Athanasius' in L. Perrone (ed.), *Origeniana Octava: Origen and the Alexandrian Tradition* (BETL 164; Leuven: Peeters, 2004), 901-910.

⁷⁶ Confessors retained some of the authority granted to martyrs as a rudimentary cult developed. While dead martyrs posed little problem for those holding positions of ecclesiastical authority, the confessors who were released from prison posed a direct challenge to bishops whose own resolve had been questionable. See P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago

who fled persecution rather than face martyrdom, or even worse among the lapsed, they had to play down the importance of martyrdom.⁷⁷ This was especially true where groups of Christians who were considered less orthodox began producing more martyrs than the catholics; martyrdom could no longer be *the* sign of orthodoxy as it had been for Justin and Tertullian. The proto-orthodox had to reduce the number of genuine martyrs. The creation of the category equivalent to the ‘voluntary martyr’ was as much a response to a crisis in ecclesiastical authority as any genuine distaste for over-enthusiasm.⁷⁸ This explains why ‘orthodox’ voluntary martyrs are never condemned by Eusebius. Voluntary martyrdom was not the problem; ‘heretical’ martyrdom of any sort was.

It is open to question whether very much historical data can be garnered from Christian martyrologies. The level of official persecution against Christians is reckoned to be far lower than once thought. From the Christian texts alone it would be impossible to be certain what proportion of early martyrs were ‘voluntary’ in the way in which we might wish to make that distinction. It is of note that ‘pagan’ perceptions of Christianity corroborate the existence of the voluntary martyrs. Lucian, writing in the second century, says about the Christians:

The poor wretches have convinced themselves, first and foremost, that they are going to be immortal and live forever, in consequence of which they despise death *and even willingly give themselves over to arrest.*⁷⁹

Similarly, Marcus Cornelius Fronto (c. 100–166) reflects the observations that Christians have no fear of death: ‘They despise torments...while they fear to die after death, they do not

Press, 1981); F. C. Klawiter, ‘The role of martyrdom and persecution in developing the priestly authority of women in early Christianity: a case study of Montanism’, *Church History* 49 (1980), 251-61.

⁷⁷ Cyprian’s treatise *On the Lapsed* deftly defends his own decision to flee, praising those who remained and were martyred, while simultaneously limiting the authority of the confessors. For discussion on the problematic nature of martyrdom in the third and fourth centuries, see P. Middleton, ‘Enemies of the (Church and) State: Martyrdom as a Problem for Early Christianity’, *Annali di Storia dell’Esegesi* 29/2 (2012), 161-181.

⁷⁸ For a discussion of the ‘demise of radical martyrdom’ see P. Middleton, *Martyrdom: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 76-83.

⁷⁹ Lucian, *Peregrinus* 13 (emphasis added).

fear to die for the present: so does their deceitful hope soothe their fear with the solace of a revival.’⁸⁰ To Epictetus, this lack of fear and drive for death was madness,⁸¹ and he dismissed the readiness of Christians for death as mere habit.⁸² For Epictetus, Christian contempt for death was unreflective.⁸³ Therefore, Christians appear to be known, perhaps even defined in pagan eyes as the sect that sought death. What Epictetus knows about the Christians is that they were death-seekers, and Lucian confirms that they did voluntarily present themselves for condemnation. Of course, they were unaware of the details of Christian theology that caused them to act in such ways, but from what they observed, the Christians had what appeared to the Romans as an unnatural ‘lust for death’.

Although there is a lack of evidence to support de Ste. Croix’s claim that voluntary martyrs caused or exacerbated outbreaks of persecution, what cannot be denied is that the commitment of these Christians meant there were more instances of martyrdom than would have otherwise been the case. Early Christian martyrologies present all those who died violently for Jesus—those sought out, those who volunteered, those who draw attention to themselves during the trials of other Christians, and even those who kill themselves—as authentic martyrs. Distinguishing between ‘voluntary’ and ‘true’ martyrs was not the concern of the earliest Church. From both Christian and pagan witnesses, we may conclude that Christian voluntary martyrdom was in fact a significant historical as well as literary phenomenon.

⁸⁰ Minucius Felix, *Octavius* 8-9. Dating this charge is difficult. While Frend (*Martyrdom and Persecution*, 252) suggests the text records an option against Christians current in Rome between 150-160, a date anywhere between 160-250 is offered by S. Price, ‘Latin Christian apologetics: Minucius Felix, Tertullian, and Cyprian’ (in M. Edwards, M. Goodman, and S. Price, *Apologetics in the Roman Empire: Pagans, Jews, and Christians* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 105-29), 111-12.

⁸¹ Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.7.1-6.

⁸² Epictetus, *Discourses*, 4.7.6.

⁸³ J. Perkins, *The Suffering Self: Pain and Narrative Representation in Early Christianity* (London: Routledge, 1995), 20.